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Essays on Delsarte: Introduction

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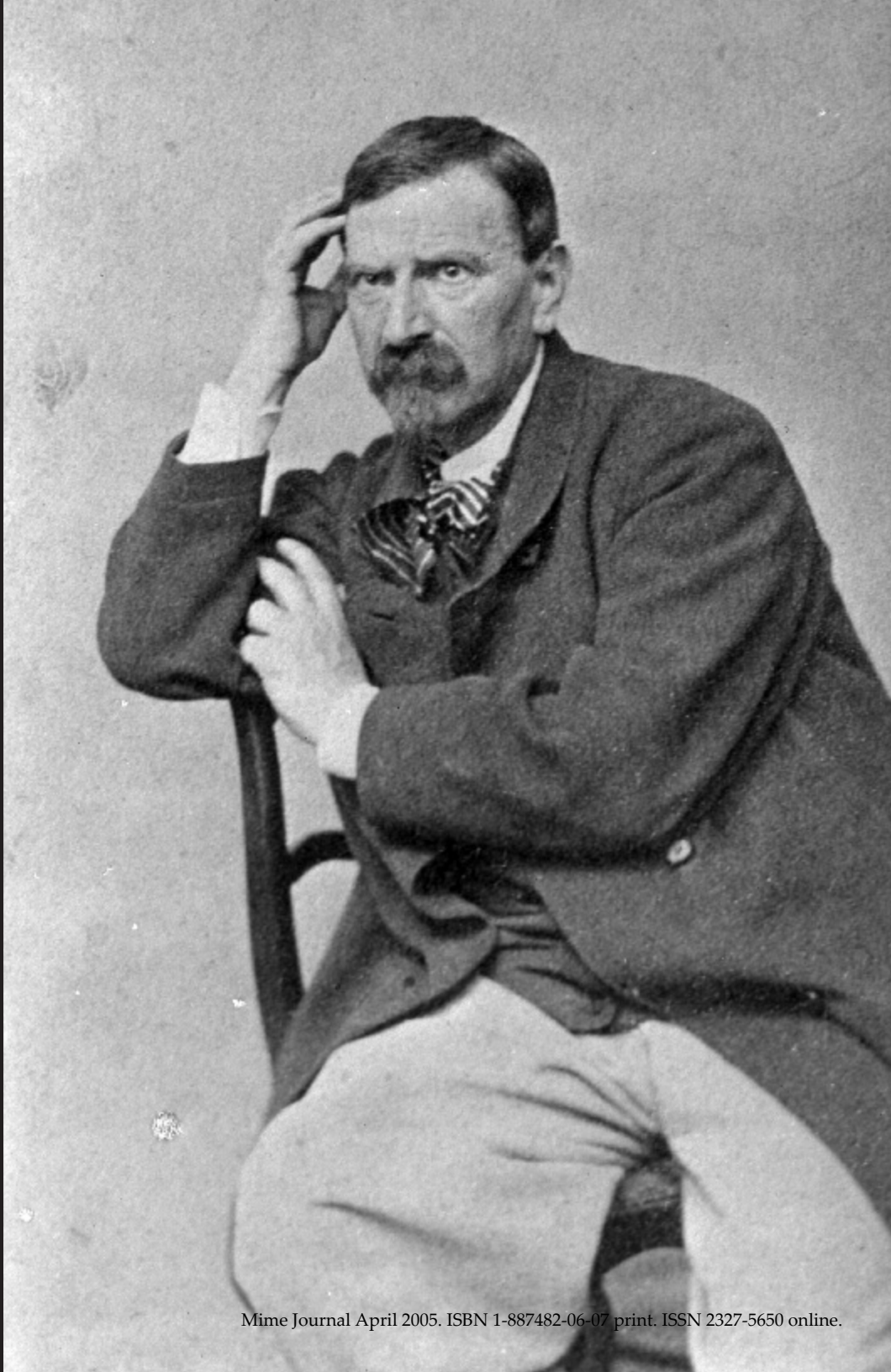
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INTRODUCTION

Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter

A few years ago, Thomas Leabhart suggested that we consider co-editing an issue on current Delsarte research. We didn't know if anyone was interested in, or working on, the topic, but we sent out a call for submissions, and discovered that interest and research ranges from the practical to the theoretical: it includes people using aspects of the Delsarte material in their own teaching and performance practice as well as historians and critics investigating Delsartism in relation to a number of topics from actor training to social and political issues. While we received submissions from both sides of the fence, we decided to limit this issue to academic and theoretical writings rather than including reports on current practical applications as the latter would make up a wholly different collection. However, for a brief description of how two contemporary artists are using Delsarte's ideas, see the Addendum.

As an introduction to this collection, I am providing a short overview of the history, contexts, and important individuals that have contributed to the phenomenon that is variously referred to as "the Delsarte System," "Delsartism," or simply "Delsarte." The sources for this introduction are mainly Ruyter 1979 and 1999; and Shawn 1974; references to specific information may be found in those works.

The core principles of Delsartism were established by the French voice and acting teacher François Delsarte (1811–1871) and passed along by those who had studied with the master himself, and then by their students, and by their students' students—transmitted through both personal instruction and writings—some published in Europe, but many more in the United States.

Undated photograph of François Delsarte.
Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

With a history developing through at least four generations of proponents and among the various fields of acting, oratory, singing, physical culture and expression, and dance, it is not surprising that different emphases and adaptations appeared under the Delsarte “umbrella” and a spectrum of interpretations, uses and teaching methods.

It is important to distinguish between, on one hand, Delsarte’s original work and its continuation through his French students (his children Gustave Delsarte and Marie Géraldy and those who wrote about the system, Abbé Delaumosne, Angélique Arnaud, and Alfred Giraudet) and, on the other, the teachers and developers of what I term American Delsartism (Steele Mackaye, Lewis B. Monroe, William R. Alger, Samuel Silas Curry, Moses True Brown, Franklin H. Sargent, Henrietta Hovey, Genevieve Stebbins, and their students and followers). There were serious practitioners and promoters of the Delsarte complex on both sides of the Atlantic, but in the United States the original theory was adapted to new purposes. Such adaptations and the proliferation of Delsartism throughout the United States led to claims of authenticity versus fakery. While it is understandable that Delsarte disciples and practitioners of the past felt compelled to defend whatever aspects of the complex each saw as being the “true” Delsarte and malign what they considered “false,” I think it is more useful to consider the various aspects of the historical development of Delsarte theory and practice with attention to the multiple ways that it has functioned and served various needs.

The context for the introduction of Delsartism in the United States was the field of elocution (voice and speech training for public speaking), which had been developing nationally from the 1820s. From mid-century on, some elocution instructors increasingly emphasized gesture and bodily motion, and the term “expression” came into vogue for work that included physical culture, pantomime, acting, and interpersonal communication as well as training for public speaking. While expression was taught by various methods, the best known and ultimately the broadest in application was the American Delsarte system. It comprised theory from Delsarte, practical exercises and formulas for expression from Mackaye (what could be termed the “Delsarte-Mackaye” system), physical training exercises from a variety of sources, and popular performance genres such as statue posing, pantomime, and dance or dance-like performance forms that incorporated or reflected Delsartean theory.

There were three phases or focuses in American Delsartism as it developed. The first began in the early 1870s and was closely associated with the professional training of speakers and actors. The second, coming to the fore in the 1880s, emphasized physical culture for the general public and was particularly popular among women. In the third and broadest aspect, which also began in the 1880s, Delsartean aesthetic theory was applied to all aspects of life. Often a single teacher offered work in two or three of the training aspects, although some specialized in only one.

The first phase began with the only known American student of Delsarte, the reputed actor, dramatist, director, and theater inventor, Steele Mackaye (1842–1894). When Mackaye began working with Delsarte in Paris in October 1869, it was not as an unsophisticated beginner as he had been developing his own approaches to expression, pantomime, gymnastics, and aesthetics since the early 1860s. Delsarte soon discovered that Mackaye could complement and enhance his own work, so he invited the new pupil to teach with him. Mackaye was still a student of Delsarte, but also became to some extent a colleague.

The Franco-Prussian War forced Mackaye to leave France in July 1870. When he returned to the United States, he was contacted by two noted Bostonians who had heard of the Delsarte-Mackaye work and wanted to learn more. Lewis B. Monroe, founder and director of the Boston University School of Oratory, studied with Mackaye and invited him to lecture at the School; and Reverend William R. Alger, a Unitarian clergyman, began his studies with Mackaye and then continued with Delsarte's son Gustave in Paris. The three friends worked to bring Delsarte to the United States to begin a school here, but his death in the summer of 1871 intervened. Mackaye directed a series of schools where the system and his development of it were integral parts of the program. Monroe included the Delsarte system in the curriculum of the Boston University School of Oratory and taught it himself as well as inviting Mackaye for lectures. Alger also taught, wrote, and lectured on Delsarte. These first three American Delsartians taught many others who, in their turn, spread knowledge of the system. However, of the three, Mackaye alone made a substantive contribution—his “aesthetic (or harmonic) gymnastics” and his “gamuts of expression”—to the development and expansion of the Delsarte complex as it became known and practiced in the United States.

The representative figure of the second phase of American Delsartism, in which physical culture for the general public was emphasized, was Genevieve Stebbins (1857–after 1930). Beginning her career as an actress, Stebbins eventually became one of the most prominent popularizers of American Delsartism through her teaching, writing, and performances. She initially developed the system furthest in the direction of dance, and she herself performed dances, pantomimes, and statue-posing for popular “ladies’ matinees.”

Stebbins, like the subsequent “modern dance” pioneers, read, researched and wrote tirelessly. An admired performing artist and teacher, her publications gave her visibility and stature in the field of physical culture and expression. Her elaboration of the Delsarte system derived from a number of sources: the theoretical and practical material she had learned from Mackaye (with whom she studied from 1876 to 1878); the Abbé Delaumosne (one of Delsarte’s French students who had written on the subject and whom she met in Paris); and from unpublished Delsarte manuscripts that she was able to obtain. But in the preface to her *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics* (1893), she acknowledges her additional debt to other specialists in acting, gymnastic and therapeutic exercise, and anthropology, and in her writings, one finds references to literature, art, music, religion, philosophy, etc.—and to yoga breathing techniques. Her publications, from the first edition of the *Delsarte System of Expression* (1885) through *The Genevieve Stebbins System of Physical Training* (1913), clearly show that while the Delsarte work remained essential for her, as time went on, she incorporated theory and practice from many other sources as well.

The third phase of American Delsartism, the broadest of all, treated all of life as art, and sought to enhance it according to the principles of Delsartean aesthetics. This phase is best represented by Henrietta Hovey (1849–1918). Born Henrietta Knapp, over the course of three marriages, her last name became Crane, then Russell, and finally Hovey (as I will refer to her here).

Hovey was the first American to begin the widespread popularization of the Delsarte system outside the fields of acting and oratory. By her early 20s she was lecturing on dress reform, and sometime in the 1870s, to improve her speech for public presentation, she entered the Boston University School of Oratory. There she learned about the Delsarte system in classes with its director, Lewis B. Monroe, and from lectures given by Mackaye. In the late 1870s (probably 1878), she traveled to Paris where she studied with Delsarte’s

son, Gustave, prior to his death in 1879. She returned to the United States and began a teaching career that would continue off and on for almost 40 years. She was recognized by some contemporaries as a serious Delsarte authority—and dismissed by others as a fraud. Most of her press coverage (which appeared on society pages) depicted her as a beautiful, exotic creature catering to upper-class, fashionable ladies. They had the leisure and money to seek classes in physical culture and expression from this icon of American Delsartism; and of course, such engagements provided both income and prestige for Hovey. It is difficult to reach any conclusion about Hovey's teaching and serious commitment to the Delsarte work until we get to Ted Shawn's contact with her. Shawn (1891–1972) with his partner Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968) was one of the leading pioneers of what developed in the twentieth-century as “modern dance.” Hovey obviously impressed Shawn deeply, and he learned much from her and respected her totally. While she, as well as Delsarte and Mackaye, had projected writing a multi-volume work on the Delsarte system, she only published *Yawning* (1891), a slight volume that elicited mocking comments in the press, and was to be the first part of the series. A long typed draft of other proposed volumes, in the Ted Shawn Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, appears to presage a substantial opus, but one that was unfortunately never realized. The fact, however, that this exists, gives an idea of the breadth and depth of Hovey's understanding of the Delsartean principles.

By the late nineteenth-century, one could find the adjective “Delsartean” applied to teachers, schools, performances, and publications—and even to corsets that were less restrictive and harmful than the ones fashionable women had been wearing. As Delsartism spread across the United States, it came to involve hundreds of teachers and thousands of students—mostly women and female children—and in the early part of the twentieth century the American version of Delsartism even traveled back to Europe to effect physical education and new dance practices in Germany and other countries. And, as discussed above, in addition to furthering the cause of women's physical culture and expression, some proponents also promoted the aesthetic principles to argue for artistry in everyday life—in clothing, house decor, social interaction, and anything else that might be thus “improved.” It was precisely this side of the popularization of American Delsartism that some critics, such as Shawn, saw as a distortion of the master's intentions—“a reversal and falsification of the science which Delsarte taught” (1974, 11). And yet, his most revered Delsartean, Henrietta Hovey, had been one of the leaders in the popularization of American Delsartism in all these aspects.

While some of the American Delsartians such as Genevieve Stebbins performed and taught dances or dance-like forms as part of their Delsartian work during the late nineteenth century, the influence of Delsartism on twentieth-century dance developments really began with the work of Shawn, St. Denis, and their company, Denishawn. Shawn's and St. Denis's knowledge and experience of the Delsarte system had gone through various phases before their contact with Hovey. In 1915, however, Shawn embarked on a more tangible and immediate experience of Delsartism than he had known previously, and, of course, he shared this with St. Denis and the members of their company and school. He took private lessons with Hovey in the summers of 1915, 1916, and 1917 and also invited her to give lectures on Delsartism at Denishawn. She became the most important source of Delsartian knowledge for Shawn and probably inspired his own intensive research into the broad spectrum of Delsartian literature that resulted in his book *Every Little Movement*. I believe that the Delsartism that Shawn came to know over the years served as a powerful, continuous and crucial guidance for his development as an artist, teacher, theorist, writer, and leader of dance in the United States—and significantly influenced his students and followers.

Although François Delsarte never showed the least interest in dance himself, his concepts and their theoretical and practical manifestations have been seminal in the development of the twentieth-century Western concert genre, "modern dance." And since the publication of Shawn's *Every Little Movement*, the contribution of the Delsartian theory and practice to the history of twentieth-century dance has been acknowledged by many dance historians and scholars—some briefly, and others with more extensive discussion and analysis. Shawn's book provides a carefully researched and well-written study of the Delsarte system and its relationship to dance and a discussion of the most important literature published up to the 1960s. It is one of the most reliable and significant sources on the subject that exists.

Within the last couple of decades, interest in the Delsarte work has developed in Europe as well as in the United States. There have been publications in France and Italy (see, for example, Porte and Randi in the bibliography), conferences and exhibitions, and the Centre National de la Danse in Paris is sponsoring a translation into French of Shawn's *Every Little Movement* which will be published in Brussels. The researchers whose articles we are presenting in this issue of *Mime Journal* give further testimony to the continuing importance of Delsarte and his followers to our history, theory, and practice.

Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter is Professor of Dance at University of California, Irvine. Her practical training has been in ballet, modern, and world dance genres; and she completed her Ph.D. in History at Claremont Graduate School (now Claremont Graduate University). She has taught, performed, and choreographed in various genres and contexts since the 1950s, including for the Pomona College Theater Department 1965–72. At UC Irvine, she teaches dance history, graduate seminars, and Spanish dance and directs the UC Irvine Spanish Dance Ensemble. Her publications include works on American dance history and Delsartism (see bibliography); on aspects of Spanish, Mexican, and Balkan dance; and on physical theater. She is currently working on a biography of the international dance artist La Meri.